

## The Coronavirus Plague in Alne, 2020

### A Personal Diary by Robert Brech

It was early in March, 2020, before we began to wake up properly to the scale of the virus that was beginning to sweep the world. Not only were Alison and I doing our normal things around the village but we were looking forward to a family and friend (16 people) skiing holiday in Breuil-Cervinia, Northern Italy in early-April, and we were planning to downsize within Alne in mid-April. So we were more than usually alert to what was going on outside the confines of Alne.

Deaths in Italy were ramping up rapidly in early March and the first coronavirus death in the UK occurred on 05-March.

It didn't take long for the skiing to be cancelled, the decision being largely taken out of our hands. I wrote to the hotel on 05-March saying "*We are all hoping to come to Hotel Sertorelli on 04-April but we are obviously concerned at the Coronavirus situation both in the UK and in Italy.*". The hotel replied the same day: "*We are very sorry for what [is] happening in our country but we specify that our region is safe and that we have no case. Also the airports are safe.*"

But on Tuesday 10-March, they wrote again: "*We are very very sorry to inform you that yesterday the Region decided to close all the lift in Valle D'Aosta from today about virus and we have to close our Hotel from today until better news.*" Fortunately they were good enough to agree to refund the 30% deposit (no small amount for 16 people) without any question and it arrived back seven days later.

Half the skiing party were flying from Manchester to Milan Malpensa with Ryanair and half from Gatwick to Malpensa with easyJet. Ryanair cancelled their flights on Wednesday 11-March and their refund arrived back within 24 hours. easyJet didn't cancel their flights until Monday 16-March and their refund took much longer, not arriving back until 56 days later and after I had written personally to their Chief Executive.

The Alne Coronavirus Support Group (ACSG) arose out of an initial email from Dominic Colenso to Alne Street Fayre Committee members on Saturday 14-March. It began: "*I'm writing to you as Street Fayre committee members as you're some of the most active people in our community*". The Street Fayre had its routine monthly meeting on Monday 16-March and, once it became clear that holding the Street Fayre on the planned date of Sunday 07-June was unlikely and that planning should be paused, talk moved on to what we could do for community support. Fuelled by free alcohol, ideas ran ahead and before the meeting had finished, we had appointed a co-ordinator, David Edwards, and had agreed a plan of action. As Chairman of Alne Parish Council, I was able to give the group the immediate approval of authority and it was as well that this had happened, as on return home there were several emails asking what we should be doing and whether very local groups could be set up. The setting up of ACSG was published on the Alne Village website on that same evening and on notice-boards a day later and within just a couple of days, 41 volunteers had put their hands up to assist. Using the existing APLA distribution maps which were already in existence, David Edwards set up seven teams in the seven designated zones (covering the whole of Alne

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Village and Alne Station), appointed team leaders and organised a flyer to be dropped into every house. This flyer (an example is shown alongside) was particularly aimed at those defined by the government as ‘vulnerable’ i.e. those who were over-70, those who were pregnant and those who had an existing medical condition which might make them more susceptible to the virus. I used the electoral roll to identify those who were suspected to be over-70 and with some assistance from those that knew, and some basic statistics, found that we could expect 126 of these in the total adult population of Alne of 575. This averaged at 18 over-70s per zone and, with more than five volunteers per zone, this was thought to be eminently manageable, even with some addition of vulnerable people of a younger age.

### **Alne Coronavirus Support Group**

*Supporting the Community at this difficult time*

Hello. If you are self-isolating, I can help!

My name is:

I live locally at:

My phone number is:

If you are self-isolating due to COVID-19 I can help with:

- Picking up shopping (large & small shops)     Posting mail  
 A friendly phone call     Urgent supplies (prescriptions)

Just call or text me and I'll do my best to help you (for free!)

Coronavirus is contagious. Please take every precaution to ensure you are spreading only kindness. Avoid physical contact (2m distance). Wash your hands regularly. Items should be left on your doorstep.

#ViralKindness

On Monday 23-March, the Prime Minister made his historic broadcast which started a policy of ‘lockdown’, effectively self-isolation, regardless of whether or not one had symptoms.

#### **UK Coronavirus Deaths\***

**(And Weekly Change)**

06-March 1  
13-March 10 (9)  
20-March 194 (184)  
27-March 1,161 (967)  
03-April 4,461 (3,300)  
10-April 10,760 (6,299)  
17-April 16,879 (6,119)  
24-April 22,792 (5,913)  
01-May 27,510 (4,718)  
08-May 31,241 (3,731)  
15-May 33,998 (2,757)  
22-May 36,393 (2,395)  
29-May 38,593 (2,200)  
05-June 40,261 (1,668)  
12-June 41,481 (1,220)  
19-June 42,461 (980)  
26-June 43,414 (953)  
03-July 44,131 (717)  
10-July 44,650 (519)  
17-July 45,233 (583)  
24-July 45,677 (444)

*The data in this table was then substantially revised and became meaningless.*

Statistics from:

<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/uk/>

\* Defined as deaths *with* Covid-19 rather than *from* Covid-19.

Everyone was to remain at home except for shopping for essential items, urgent medical reasons, essential work which could not be done at home or one outing per day for exercise. Groups of more than two people were banned and everyone was to follow a policy of ‘social distancing’, that is keeping at least two metres away from all other non-members of your household, wherever you encountered other people. We were pleased that we had acted so swiftly on Dominic Colenso’s original suggestion and that David Edwards and his teams had swung so quickly into action. Every person in Alne had received a leaflet and those who were ‘vulnerable’ knew they had a support team around them and the necessary contact details.

Back on the personal front, we had already bought 6 Hallgarth early in the New Year and had agreed a sale of Alne Croft with completion aimed for mid-April. All was going well until the first quotation from a removals company on 19-March had a large coronavirus warning across it saying that if they were prevented from carrying out the move by the dictates of the government or the sickness of their staff, then this was our liability and not theirs. At the same time, two other removals companies had failed to turn up for their viewing appointments and a fourth cancelled. It was clear that we were not going to be able to move physically and, following the Prime Minister’s announcement and on the advice of our solicitor, we paused the process on the morning of

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Tuesday 24-March. One of the reasons for downsizing was to reduce the size of our garden, which we were finding increasingly difficult to manage, but we felt that continuing to have nearly an acre at Alne Croft would give us something to do during this enforced 'pause'. Every cloud has its silver lining!

As I write this paragraph on 31-March, I reflect that this is an extraordinary month we have lived through. I can't believe that it was only three weeks ago that we were looking forward to skiing in April and to going to Tenby in May. How our lives have changed! The kitchen calendar has everything crossed out. Pilates cancelled, gym sessions cancelled, chiropodist cancelled, Alison's Choir and Reading Group cancelled, the spring litter-pick cancelled, hairdresser and barber cancelled, Village Hall talk and pop-up pub cancelled, university events cancelled, physio appointment cancelled, lunch with friends cancelled, carpet-fitter cancelled, plumber cancelled, tennis matches and club sessions cancelled. The list goes on.

Children have generally been at home for the last couple of weeks of the Lent term. Some have had home schooling online, some have had parents taking over from the schools. This creates some difficulty for working Mums as the notice on the right (from the Sophie Hutchinson household) clearly demonstrates!



The village is taking the lockdown measures very seriously. People who might pass on the pavement are moving a conspicuous distance away from each other, stepping into the road and taking the risk of the traffic rather than the risk of another person. Not that there is much traffic, anyhow, apart from the ubiquitous tractors and farm machinery. On the other hand, cross-street chats are more numerous than they used to be and people are talking to other people that they might not have come across before.

The news on 06-April that Prime Minister Boris Johnson had been taken into intensive care brought the whole nation together. Even his opponents were united with his supporters in wishing him well and the general feeling was that if he could survive and safely come out the other side of his ordeal, then so could we all. If he did not survive, then what other catastrophes might lie ahead?

On 14-April, we completed three weeks in lockdown. We had survived pretty well in Alne. We had had three weeks of dry sunshine which greatly enabled people to get out for their daily walk and to get on with preparing their gardens, and we had decent broadband which greatly facilitated those who were working from home. We were very fortunate in this regard, we had space, we had gardens, and there was plenty of room for walks; we felt very sorry for those who were living in high-rise flats in crowded urban areas. The ACSG volunteers (now up to more than 44 in number) were only being lightly used by those who couldn't venture out and this was mainly for shopping, the collection of prescriptions and necessary postal and banking services. Neighbours were also helping out neighbours and the onset of the Village

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Doorstep initiative of local shops taking orders and delivering to the door was an added bonus, with Tollerton Stores being in the forefront.

On Thursday 16-April, a further 3-week period of lockdown was announced by the government and there was a collective groan. We knew that we had to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed and to save lives but other countries were beginning to lighten the restrictions and we wanted to know when our turn might come. Some industries were still operating (a boiler technician had come yesterday to fit a new boiler into our new house) but there was a general feeling that more could be done – why were garden centres still closed, for example, which was only of benefit to those big supermarkets offering their own plants?

One of the by-products of the situation is that our freezer, fridges and cupboards are fuller than we can ever remember. At the beginning of lockdown, there was a rush on the supermarkets and pictures were published of people bearing away whole trolley-loads of toilet rolls and other thought-to-be essentials. The idea of stock-outs were of course the cause of them and shelves were soon empty of most day-to-day items in the larger stores. But the supermarkets rallied round and shortages only lasted a couple of weeks while everything could generally be found in smaller stores, online or locally, although toilet rolls did take about three weeks to come back onto the shelves. We did not take part in the initial rush but, once things settled down, we found that being advised not to shop more than once weekly made us more cautious to stock up and to ensure we were provided for in the event of another unnecessary set of shortages. Boots the Chemist in Easingwold invariably had a queue outside for all of the lockdown and the coffee van attracted a queue as soon as it re-opened. But the queues were very orderly and distanced as shown. [Photos courtesy Andrea Duffield, Nigel Knapton, Robert Brech]



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It is interesting to reflect on the similarities between today and the Alne plague of 1604, some notes on which can be found in Appendix 1. The importance of social distancing and the pursuit by the authorities of those breaking the rules are very reminiscent of today.

So it all seems rather cosy in Alne. We have our gardens, we have lots of walks around, we are helping and donating to others less fortunate. I asked the curate (who lives in the village) and the local foodbank manager if there were people struggling and suffering in Alne so that we could give them some space in this history but neither has been forthcoming with any information.

On the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day (08-May), impromptu socially-distanced tea parties sprang up around the village and people lounged on benches (2 metres apart) and indulged in some old-fashioned chatter over tea and Prosecco.

This date also marked nearly seven weeks under lockdown and some relaxations were eagerly awaited. The UK currently has the highest total coronavirus deaths in Europe (although not the highest in terms of rate per population) and some thought was being given as to how we might have organised things differently. We have to remember that the general election of 12-December-2019 had brought in a new government with a sizeable majority and a mandate to leave the EU on 31-January-2020 as had been promised in the election manifesto. This was clearly the priority in the early part of 2020 and it can well be seen that the epidemic springing up in China was not of the first importance. The UK was probably late in reacting to the virus, was not as well-prepared as it might have been and was slow to see the likely effect in care homes. But this is not surprising given that the focus was elsewhere.

(...to be continued)

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### Appendix 1: The Plague of 1604 in Alne as described within Alne Annals

#### **From Vallis Eboracensis by Thomas Gill**

In 1604, the plague raged to such an alarming extent in this neighbourhood that the markets were prohibited to prevent the contagion from spreading in the country; and stone crosses were erected in various places in the vicinity, where the country-people brought their goods (marked with the price demanded) and left them at or near the cross; afterwards the villagers came there, took away their goods and left their money in their place, which afterwards the owners of the goods came and took away; the parties thus never coming in contact, These stones were called plague stones, and the markets thus held, the fetch and carry market. One of those crosses still remains at the spot where the lanes cross each other leading to Tollerton, Youlton, Flawith, and Tholthorpe, to memorialize the period when so many thousands of our fellow beings were suddenly swept into eternity. This pestilence is said to have proved fatal to 11,000 persons in York.

#### **From a supplement to the Yorkshire Herald dated November 19, 1927**

In 1604 the plague which, during the preceding year, had carried off 30,578 persons in London, raged to an alarming extent in York and district, no less than 3,512 inhabitants of York alone falling victims to it, though by the precautions used, it was not of long duration. To prevent the contagion from spreading into the country, stone crosses were erected in various parts of the vicinity of York, where the country people without coming into the city, met the citizens, and sold them their commodities.

#### **David Newton's personal notes**

In 1604 the plague raged throughout York and district. (In Alne in 1604 and in Huby in 1625.) Robert Bossal of Huby was prosecuted: "Brought, thought to be infected goods from London". His punishment was a fine of £40 and he was put in the stocks at Malton for three hours.